

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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WAIVER OF MARINE MAMMAL MORATORIUM RECOMMENDED BY ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE

An administrative law judge has recommended that the management of polar bears, walruses, sea otters, and six other marine mammal species be returned to the State of Alaska.

Under Judge Malcolm Littlefield's June 30 recommendation, a moratorium imposed in 1972 on taking and importing these animals, except for scientific research, public display, and Native subsistence should be waived, and management of their populations should again become the State's responsibility. Notice of the recommended decision was published in the Federal Register on July 20.

The decision is now being reviewed by the two Directors of the Federal agencies with marine mammal jurisdiction: Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Commerce Department's National Marine Fisheries Service. Each of the two agency heads will then announce his own decision. The Fish and Wildlife Service has jurisdiction over polar bears, walruses, and sea otters, and the National Marine Fisheries Service has responsibility for beluga whales, ringed seals, bearded seals, harbor seals, northern sea lions, ribbon seals, and largha seals.

Interested parties have until August 22 in which to file comments on the recommended decision. Comments concerning the walrus, polar bear, and sea otter should be addressed to the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

(over)

Judge Littlefield made his recommended decision after presiding at five public hearings in Alaska and Washington, D.C., where testimony was presented by various groups on the proposal to waive the moratorium. He further suggested modification in the State's laws and regulations before management of these species is returned to the State. In his decision, he recommended that the waiver and return of management to Alaska of the Pacific walrus, which was initially implemented April 1976, be continued.

The judge found that the populations of the nine marine mammal species in Alaska were within the range of "optimum sustainable population"--a term defined in the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. This term generally refers to the relationship between the numbers of animals and the ecosystem of which they are a part.

If the two Federal agencies accept the judge's recommendation, the result could be a limited amount of subsistence and sport hunting of these species with the following maximum annual quotas imposed by the judge: polar bears, 170 animals; walruses, 3,000 animals. Up to 3,000 sea otters could also be taken for management purposes.

All taking would have to be in accordance with Alaska State laws and regulations. According to the judge's findings, the taking of all these species within the limits prescribed will not affect the ability of populations to sustain themselves.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act placed a moratorium on the taking and importation of marine mammals with certain exceptions for scientific and display purposes, and for Native subsistence.